

# LANDSCAPE OF THE COUNTRY WHICH MY FAMILY CALLS 'HOME'

**Robyne Bancroft**

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Many Aboriginal people in Australia regard landscape in ways common to their own life experiences, which differs from the white perspective of land and landscape. Many Aboriginal people consider the land to be sacred. This relationship includes the use of natural resources, social organisations, values and laws. Traditional knowledge is handed down in the form of story telling, knowing the place names within the landscape and being at one with the flora and fauna of that area. Creation stories relate special features within the landscape and involve the earth, the sky, the elements, directions, seasons and the ancestor's spirits of that landscape.

I acknowledge the great diversity and individuality of Aboriginal people and my clan is proud to be part of the strong revitalisation of cultural heritage that is now occurring. My people, the Djanbun people, of the Washpool area of northeastern New South Wales have an intimate knowledge of the land of our ancestors. Oral and cultural traditions are continued when the family return home from far and wide for the beginning of each year 'ceremony' time. What does this special time mean? It means that it is a time of renewing contact with the ancestors, with the landscape and with the clan, reinforcing cultural values and involves all members participating and contributing in some way to the special ceremony of the day.

The white man came to our country in 1840. Our clan and family lives were shattered. We were chased with rifles from the land where we used to hunt and fish. Thousands of sheep brought into our country had a devastating effect on the local native animals and plants. The kangaroos all but disappeared. Shooting our people and our animal food resources was a sport for the first squatters to come to our home. However, a small group of between 8 and 10 people of our clan survived. They did this by knowing where to hide and what resources to use to survive; they knew their landscape. Soon a move was made by the local squatter and his brother to persuade our group of their 'honourable' intentions as they set out to steal our land and its resources. These 'new' people desperately needed shepherds for the sheep that now ran amuck and they needed labourers to help them establish themselves on what they now called 'their land'. Our group resisted and Aboriginal people were brought in from other areas for this work. Only when two members of our group were left and both suffering from ill health did they come down from the hills to the outskirts of the squatters 'land'.

We welcome you to share a part of our special gathering. We remember the survival of our clan at the yearly ceremonies. The most important aspect of our ceremony is the 'smoking' and 'cleansing' undertaken by all family present. We have a special area, which was our clans meeting place and is now ours. On this sacred site people met, this was where rules of conduct, customs, rituals and offerings were made. This is where the descendants of the original custodians continue to meet.

We begin by gathering rocks from the river and using them to make a sacred circle on the riverbank. This circle has a small opening facing the rising sun, the east, and extending

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about three-quarters of a metre. In the middle of the circle we light a small gum leaf fire and put a coolamon of crushed ochre and also a container of water in the circle. Our Elders have 'meditated' while the younger ones gathered the river stone. At the appropriate time, an Elder with a novice younger adult stands in the circle with another Elder at the entrance. The members of the group walk slowly, one at a time, clockwise into and around the inside of the circle while an Elder waves smoke from the fire onto the person standing halfway around the inner circle. The inner wrists and the forehead are daubed with a dot of ochre on each area and 'special words' are spoken to that person. They then continue walking leaving the circle the way they entered. At this time another Elder sprinkles the 'water of life' onto our person by dipping gum leaves in a container of water then shaking the leaves on each person as they leave the circle. Babies are carried by their mothers and are part of the same process.

This spiritual cleansing is to prepare clan members to 'walk' into the next year with health and happiness, remembering country and each one's place within the country of their ancestors. After the ceremony is completed we then form a circle and reaffirm our 'being' within the landscape. We promote awareness of our clans 'being' and we believe in sharing knowledge. Women play an important part in life for us and it is to the mother spirit that we dedicate our ceremony, so that our young ones never forget that they are from a matrilineal group within an eastcoast matrilineal nation. Throughout the ceremony we continually ask our ancestors to look after their descendants, guide us and protect us on our land. If any visitors to our country 'humbug' then they have to accept the consequences of their actions.

Those present know they have to contribute to the ceremony in a number of ways. The very young have painted handprints or various forms of 'art' done at the site. The older ones have already thought about and prepared a story on the birds and animals of the area. Others tell about the hills, the mountains, the rivers and creeks, the caves, the boulders and the landscape in general. Others in the group 'walk' the land. Elders keep a watchful eye on events and are there to give their support and guidance. We give thanks that we still live on and can return to our ancestor's country. We are pleased to have shared this small part of our special ceremony with you.

It hasn't been easy going since the white man came, to survive in one's own country, but we have done it and so have many other Aboriginal groups on the continent of Australia. It is not only at ceremony time that the family, who live in other people's country return home, but also during school holidays and whenever they can. We are not static, while maintaining traditional Aboriginal values; we adapt in order to survive in this new technological age. It is this feeling of interconnectedness to the landscape that calls us back.

Place names are important for continuity and it is continuity that allows us our place in the landscape. We have names and stories for features in the landscape and for animals and birds. We have names and stories attached to the stars that can be seen in the sky at night. Like signposts, certain features within the landscape give us our 'knowing' of our country.

A second major change occurred with our landscape in the 1870's. Gold was discovered, and the area was gazetted as a gold field. Not sheep this times, but thousands of people of all nationalities flocked to our country seeking their fortunes. Two small townships were established with boarding houses, butchers, bakers, part-time schools, pubs and various other small businesses. Hundreds of shafts were dug down deep in the earth and into the side of the hills. The gold boom only lasted a few years and most white people gradually left our country seeking their fortunes elsewhere. Some of the people stayed tried to eke out a living in an isolated and difficult terrain with two or three families becoming permanent residents for fifty or so years. The descendants of these early 'settlers' now return to reminisce, they too remember special places in the landscape. We are happy that they also appreciate our ancestor's country and all that it encompasses.

But all is not well nowadays. We now are experiencing our third major upheaval in the name of 'tourists'. (Named 'terrorists' by a family member). They arrive every holiday

with their state of art four wheel drives, caravans and trailers. Trail bike riders have found nirvana on our country. They tear up the landscape, disturb the habitats of native animals and generally create havoc. There is nothing we can do about it. Big money people in Melbourne have bought most of the land in our country. They are absentee landlords with occasional visits to check up on their 'holdings'. Not all tourists are inconsiderate but many leave their bottles, beer cans and living mess exposed on the river banks which we spend weekends cleaning up after they go. We don't like it but have accepted that this is the 'new' way.

As mentioned before, within our country were two gold mining towns. Not many people today know the layout of the towns however one man who still lives in this country and who had an intimate knowledge of both the European and Aboriginal sites and artefacts is Pat Bancroft. Now in his 80s, Pat shows family and interested people where old buildings were, where the gold mines were that he worked with his father. He knows the landscape and can read it like a map and he still continues the age-old practice of 'burning off' the grasses. We consider this recent landscape also a part of our heritage.

The broken down 5 stamper gold crusher of my grandfathers, the 130 year old, barely visible in the vegetation, cricket pitch a legacy of my great-grandfather's days in the 1870s. All the evidence left by our Aboriginal and European ancestors in the landscape gives us a feeling of belonging. Not only is the traditional spiritual landscape of importance, there is also the created landscape to consider. Homes were built over time from local timbers and strategically placed near water, protected from fierce winds by a mixture of natural native trees and imported European trees. Within the homestead landscape are the vegetable garden patches, the flower gardens, the fruit trees, the yards, the stockyards and 'chook' sheds, the corn crushing shed, the sulky shed and all the sheds, even the outhouse, have a story to tell.

Finally no words can really describe our feeling for the land and all that it encompasses. Just crossing over the big river and knowing we are in our ancestors', our country, gives us a special feeling of being home. Every part of the landscape says to us 'welcome back, welcome home'. As always a pair of eagles will come out and fly overhead to also welcome us. If we don't see eagles we then wonder what strangers are present and what they are doing.

Aboriginal people are custodians of a land given the task of looking after country. In this day and age unless one buys the land, the country very little can be said about our landscape. Many Aboriginal people do not own, as in property, the land, but we shall continue our role as custodians for as long as humanly possible. We have deep ties and memories to our homes within the landscape and these are still the 'ties that bind'.

The concept of inspirational landscapes means different things to different people. Many Aboriginal people regard the landscape and all that is within the landscape as relevant to their spirituality, customs, lores and laws and identity. Bushlands, Deserts and Plains, Woodlands, Wetlands, Swamps, Rivers and Waterways, inspire great poets, artists and authors from the desert people to the freshwater people to the saltwater people.

Consultation at grass roots level with those government departments and legislators who make decisions on hunting, gathering and fishing on ancestors' lands has to be meaningful and have positive outcomes beneficial to both parties. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; appalling health statistics and high unemployment of Aboriginal people continue to have a major impact on Aboriginal people.

Throughout the disillusionment and despair there is always hope and pride. As shown by my families personal story above, and there are many similar stories throughout the country, which reinforces that the landscape and all that it encompasses is indeed 'inspirational'.